

WRIGHT BROTHERS MASTER PILOT AWARD

**Fairbanks Flight Standards District
Office Honoree 2004**



HELMERICKS, Harmon “Bud”. Bud Helmericks grew up on a farm in Illinois. His interest in flying started when he used to watch Charles Lindbergh fly his airplane over their farm. When he was about 21 years old, his great uncle Fred, who ran telegraph lines to Nome, lured him to Alaska where he got a job working for the Alaska Railroad.

When the war came along, he answered the call of duty and joined the Army where he served in the Army Corp of Engineers. After the Army, Bud went on to learn to fly in a 65 horsepower Taylorcraft airplane.

In 1953, he married Martha. Together they established a homestead on the Colville River Delta, located on the North Slope of Alaska, where they raised their children and Bud continued his adventure as one of the first Alaskan bush pilots. The Alaska of 50 years ago was very different from the Alaska most of us are familiar with. Bud describes a time when people relied heavily on each other and men and women had a lot of faith in one another. He said that he would never have achieved what he did without the help of his wife, Martha.

He remembers one time in particular when he returned to his homestead, only to find that fog had settled over the area. He circled over the homestead, but was unable to see the runway. Suddenly he saw a flame pop up. By following the flame, he was able to locate the runway and make a safe landing. It turns out that Martha had heard him circling overhead and knew that he was in trouble. Thinking quickly, she grabbed up a load of dirty laundry, ran out to the runway, and lit the laundry on fire! Bud said that she later told him that she never did miss any of that laundry!

Another episode he remembers occurred one windy day on the Arctic coast. Bud and Martha had just landed at a point on the ocean when Bud jumped out of the floatplane to tie it up. About that time, a gust of wind caught the airplane and it started to drift out to sea, with Martha in it! Knowing that Martha had never started an airplane before, Bud knew they were in serious trouble. He started to yell directions to Martha on how to start the plane. Finally, when the plane was about 40 yards away, he saw the propeller start to turn and heard the engine spring to life. Amazingly Martha had managed to start the engine and was able to safely taxi the plane back to shore. Talk about a heart stopping moment!

Luckily not all of Bud's days were filled with such adventure. Many days were routine days spent flying fish to Barrow, guiding hunters and fishermen, with the occasional family outing to visit with friends scattered across the vast Alaskan wilderness.

Bud's familiarity with the North Slope also allowed him to be directly involved in the discovery and initial development of the great oilfields of Prudhoe Bay, as well as contributing to other important finds, many of which would later contribute to the development of Alaska's natural resources.

In spite of his busy lifestyle, Bud has found time to write several books and magazine articles capturing the early days of bush flying in Alaska, as well as being a spokesman for conservation and prudent game management and contributing to the development of several films.

Bud's career as a bush pilot also brought him into contact with many interesting people. He recalls one day when Bill Lear called him up to talk about a problem he was encountering with his aircraft. He couldn't figure out why his jets were falling apart in the air and wanted to know if Bud, with his aviation and engineering background, could help him find a fix. Between the two, they determined that the problem was probably caused by vibration and, by drilling one hole in the airplane, they were able to control the flutter and fix the problem. This phone call strengthened the concept that aviation is a close-knit community with everyone working together towards its advancement.

All in all, Bud has lived an exciting life, following his dreams and his passion for flying, all the while paving the way for future Alaskan pilots. He and his wife, Martha, live in Fairbanks and have three sons, Jim, Mark, and Jeffrey, all of whom followed in their father's footsteps and became commercial pilots.